

Angels in Orthodox Religious Practice and Art

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1. The Angels' Nature and Celestial Liturgy

Angels – ἄγγελος viz. ἄγγελοι – fulfil the function of connecting a heavenly and an earthly world. As “special figures of power”¹ they have been entrusted with a number of tasks: guardian angels, atoning, interpreting, punishing, nations’ angels, the Lord’s angel, angels of the heavenly host, and several others more. Such functions were already known in early Jewish and early Christian apocalypics, though this did not yet result in worshipping angels. When the worshipping of angels grew more and more incontrollable (especially in Asia Minor²), in the 5th / 6th century AD Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita further developed the system of celestial and terrestrial, i.e. invisible and visible hierarchies³ which promoted the system of Christian angelology.⁴ According to him the angels form a hierarchy with fixed ranks, and the nine names which we find for the celestial orders in Holy Scripture inform us about the nature of the angels and their grouping.

1 Cf. for the following Onasch, *Lexikon* 100f.

2 Cf. as documents for this e. g. the early Byzantine inscription from the theatre in Milet, on which Deißmann, *Licht* 393–399 comments: here the archangels not only are related to sequences of vowels, but also to certain symbols [NB: in correcting the first edition: *not* with planetary symbols!].

3 The idea of a hierarchical arrangement of the angels’ world already existed in several Fathers’ writings: cf. Ignatius, *Trall.* 5, 2; Hermas, *Vis.* 3, 4, 2; Irenaeus, *haer.* 2, 30, 6; Clemens Alex., *Paed.* 1, 45, 2; and, *strom.* 6, 57, 5; 7, 6, 4; cf. also Michl, *Engel* 171–173.

4 Cf. Pseudo-Dionysios Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia*; he combined here Old- and Newtestamental thoughts, Neoplatonic speculations and early church mysticism and established a doctrine of heavenly orders. Whereas with the earlier Fathers of the Church the opinion prevailed, that angels had an aetherial body, the Areopagite regards them as pure immaterial spirits; nearly all later Fathers followed him. The system developed by Pseudo-Dionysios still accepted by the Orthodox Church and it had an enormous impact on the Western church, where Pope Gregory the Great († 604) made it popular; for first information cf. Altaner / Stuiber, *Patrologie* 501–505: 504.

The world of spiritual hosts is classified into three tripartite orders: the first triad consists of the Seraphim, the Cherubim and the Thrones; the second is composed of the Dominations, the Principalities and the Powers; Virtues, archangels and angels form the lowest triad. However, Dionysius himself does not always strictly keep this sequence,⁵ and others even less so. But always angels and archangels take the lowest ranks, and the Cherubim and Seraphim – whose sequence may vary – the highest. The uppermost hierarchy directly communicates with God, the lowest one directly communicates with men, the middle one receives God's illuminations through the uppermost one and transmits them to the lowest hierarchy.⁶

The Seraphim⁷ are according to their (Hebrew) name the "burning" or "glowing" ones.⁸ Revealed as everlasting and incessant mobility around the divine they have the power "to purify by burning, all-consuming flames", as Isaiah tells us in his call-vision (Isa 6:1-13). The six-winged⁹ Seraphim are the lightish indication of God's presence; they are associated with purest light, fiery love, immaculate purity, and wisdom. According to Germanos of Constantinople the deacons represent the Seraphim in liturgy.¹⁰

The Cherubim¹¹ are those beings who are characterized by their name as "abundance of recognition",¹² as "profusion of wisdom". God enabled them to look at him directly; maybe because of this they are also called πολυόμματα, the multiple-eyed.¹³ They are "quadri-formed" (τετράμορφος), though it is not clear whether this attribute refers to every single one or to all four taken together. They speak loud the Trishagion¹⁴ together with the Seraphim, and together they participate in the Eucharist.¹⁵

5 Cf. Dion. Ar., *c.h.* 1, 2.

6 Cf. Dion. Ar., *c.h.* 7, 2, 4; 9, 2, 4; 8.

7 Hebrew loanword in Greek *σεραφίμ*; Old Slavonic *серафими*.

8 Cf. Hieronymus, *Is.* 6: 21: „incendentes sive comburentes”; Gregor M., *In evang.* 34, 10: „ardentes vel incendentes”.

9 ἑξαπτέρυγα: cf. Michl, Engel 178.

10 Bentchev, *Engelikon* 34.

11 Hebrew loanword in Greek *χερουβίμ*; Old Slavonic *херувимы*.

12 Cf. e. g. Clemens Alex., *strom.* 5, 35, 6 who adopted an interpretation of Philo, *Mos.* 2, 97, 9.

13 Cf. Michl, Engel 177.

14 Cf. e.g. Ambrosius, *In Luc.* 7, 120; in other Fathers together with the angels and archangels, cf. e. g. the *Tedeum* in Roman liturgy. There are also texts (cf. Michl, Engel 179), where only the Cherubim sing the *Trishagion*.

15 Cf. Johannes Chrysostomus, *De paenit. hom.* 9. – NB: the idea that these angels are present during the service influenced the appearance of the *flabellum*, a liturgical utensil to drive away insects from the offerings: on its central disc the winged heads

The Thrones¹⁶ have a god-like quality. Because they are bearing God's image on them, they are perfect bearers of God, Seraphim and Cherubim simultaneously.¹⁷

The nature of this uppermost hierarchy consists in purity, enlightenment and perfection: Pure they are because they immaculately and perfectly take in the creator's holiness. In perceiving God they do not depend on metaphors and symbols; rather they are provided with a light by which they can look at his original beauty. They live in the immediate vision of God and communicate their insights to the following triads so that God will be glorified in hymns by all blissful spirits.

Again their names inform us about the characteristics of the second triad's nature. The Dominations¹⁸ intimately participate in the similarity to God as the original source of any sovereignty, and they enjoy a way of governing that does never degenerate and become tyranny. According to Dionysius they settle the angels' duties and execute divine orders by dominating other angels without degrading them, though.

The Principalities (or Forces)¹⁹ are distinguished by unflinching manliness and receptivity of divine illuminations.²⁰ According to Dionysius their name indicates their intrepidity facing any enterprise, a courage tirelessly receiving the illuminations granted by the divine principle cause.

A well-ordered harmony in receiving the divine is peculiar to the Powers,²¹ therefore they can easily lead themselves and those beings who are their inferior, to God.

The peculiarities of the third triad are illuminated by their names as well. The Virtues (or: First Beginnings)²² are revealed as those beings who participate in God's principality and simultaneously lead others to God by their "princely guidance".

of Cherubim were fixed; the big fans made of ostrich-feathers, which accompanied the Pope's liturgical entrance and exit on the *Seda gestatoria*, were also called "Cherubim": cf. Michl, Engel 179; Braun, Altargerät 642, 648, 650.

16 Greek θρόνοι; Old Slavonic прѣстоулы.

17 Gregory of Nyssa, *Eun.* I (= PG 45, 348) obviously understood "Thrones" as a translation of the word "Cherubim": ὁ γὰρ Θρόνων μνημονεύσας, ἄλλω ὀνόματι τὰ Χερουβὶμ διηγῆσαι (there follows a reason for this, especially based on Psalms).

18 Greek κυριότητες; Latin *dominationes*; Old Slavonic господства.

19 Greek δυνάμεις; Latin *potestates*; Old Slavonic силаѣ.

20 NB: "principalities" not only designates an angelic order, but sometimes also a group of supernatural beings besides the angels; it may also be a collective term designating celestial spiritual beings in general; cf. Michl, Engel 180f.

21 Greek ἔξουσία; Latin *virtutes*; Old Slavonic власти.

22 Greek ἀρχαί; Latin *principates*; Old Slavonic начаала.

The choir of the holy archangels²³ takes the middle position between the Virtues and the angels; because on the one hand they are oriented towards the princely sovereignty, on the other hand they fulfil the function of interpreters and communicate God's decisions to men. For Dionysius they are the real heralds and messengers who transmit God's commands to the angels and to men; their position as "interpreters" enables them to communicate God's advice to men.

Finally, the angels²⁴ bear their name justly because it makes obvious their nature being "messengers"; they are closest to us humans.

The system here developed forms the basis of the concepts of the choirs of angels.²⁵ According to this view the celestial hierarchy was arranged by God himself; it is a recurring copy of God's trinitary original beauty. The supreme order surrounds the Most High in god-like transfiguration. It communicates divine light, understanding and grace to the lower groups. Ecclesiastical hierarchy is an image of the celestial one. Through Christ both are integrated within God's trinitary abundance of life. Ecclesiastical grades of ordination correspond to the celestial orders.

Hymns which mention the supernatural orders show that the appreciation of the Thrones, whose functions are not clearly different from those of the Cherubim and Seraphim, is secondary as compared to their position. Angels and archangels, however, considerably surpass the middle triad though not always when enumerating the orders, yet with regard to high esteem. It is mainly the Cherubim and Seraphim, the angels and archangels who are mentioned in liturgy – and this quite justly so; for their duties and ranks of honour are most clearly testified in Holy Scripture.

The *Hermeneia*, the handbook of painting by the painting monk Dionysios from Mount Athos,²⁶ offers instruction for decorating churches dating back to earliest times; for designing the celestial hierarchy there are the following guidelines.²⁷ The Thrones are to be represented as a fiery wheel consisting of four circling wings. The Cherubim will be clad in a robe, mantle, and tunic; they have two wings. The Seraphim

23 Greek ἀρχάγγελοι; Latin *archangeli*; Old Slavonic архангелы.

24 Greek ἄγγελοι; Latin *angeli*; Old Slavonic ангелы.

25 The nine choirs of heavenly spirits are often mentioned in liturgical texts; often the sequence within enumerations differs from the system established by Ps-Dionysius. – It should be mentioned that there are also further choirs of angels, which have not been included in the number of the nine choirs, e. g. the "spirits" (πνεύματα), the "Aeons" (αἰῶνες), the "armies" (στρατιαί), the "bright beings" (λαμπρότητες), the "rises" (ἀναβάσεις), the "glories" (*gloriae*) etc.: cf. Michl, Engel 174f.

26 ἙΡΜΗΝΕΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΖΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΗΣ. Malerhandbuch.

27 Cf. Malerhandbuch 45, no. 73.

appear as angels, red like fire, with three pairs of fiery wings, a flaming sword in their right hand; wings serve as their garment, their feet remain bare. The Dominations are characterized by gown and mantle without decorations, one pair of wings, a crosier in their right and a ball bearing the inscription "Jesus Christ" in their left hand. The Principalities wear gowns and mantles like the Dominations, have one pair of wings, but bare feet. The Powers appear in robes, mantles, and tunics reaching down to their knees and showing richly ornamented hems; for the rest they will be presented like the Dominations. More precious garments than those of the Powers adorn the Virtues; they are provided with shoes, and instead of the crosier they carry a lily. The archangels appear as warriors with armour and boots, though without helmets, and with one pair of wings; in their left they are holding a ball bearing Christ's monogram, in their right a sword pointing upwards. The angels are identified as deacons clad in alb, tunic, and maniple, their feet richly ornamented; they bear the crosier on the right and the Christ-ball on the left.²⁸

Just a further remark on colours: The angels in the mosaics in S. Maria Maggiore (first half of 5th century) have a red incarnate²⁹ which indicates their ethereal body according to many Fathers of the Church; the bright light-coloured white of their garment may be interpreted as a symbol of their purity. The angels of grace and the angel of damnation in S. Apollinare Nuovo (first half of 6th century) are entirely red viz. blue: according to Augustine³⁰ and Fulgentius of Ruspe,³¹ demons and evil angels have bodies consisting of air – so the blue colour here points to the sphere of the air and sin as opposed to the red region of the sinless empyrean above it.³² Nevertheless, in the Middle Ages there are also blue Seraphim and red Cherubim,³³ but for the most part, the Seraphim are painted red in order to indicate their burning nature.

28 Knowledge about the different orders of the angels is not that important for Christian doctrine; this is also to be seen in the descriptions in the painters' manual as they do not give specific characteristics of the incorporeal powers – only excepting the Seraphim and the Thrones. To which of the choirs the represented being belongs often only the captions make clear.

29 *Incarnate* is a term from painting; it designates the tint of colour used for presenting naked parts of the human body.

30 Cf. Augustinus, *civ.* 8, 15.

31 Cf. Fulgentius, *Trin.* 9.

32 *Empyreum* is the name of the outward sphere in the Ptolemaic system of the world (Greek ἔμυρονος = being in fire), the sphere beyond the fixed stars also called *heaven of fire*.

33 Cf. Kirschbaum, *L'angelo* 204–248; quoted according to Kirschbaum, *Engel* 633.

1.2. Celestial Liturgists

To describe a creature one must also discuss the question of its aim and purpose. In its hymns and prayers Byzantine liturgy talks about the angels' activities, works, commissions, and functions in such a way that behind all their doings the final purpose of their existence becomes evident: The innermost cause of their existence is God's will, who has created them for his own praise and glory; in adoration they stand before His majesty, this is their very nature! Every other function they fulfil in mankind's interest proceeds from this: each creature is to be led to participate in the creator's life and the proclamation of his glory. After all the angels are "spirits in the divine service (λειτουργικά πνεύματα), sent to serve (διακονία) for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebr 1:14); and salvation means that man is integrated into the life of his origin, that he is included in the bliss of those standing by God's throne.

Liturgy in a cultic sense means a public activity sustained by the community for God's glory. Being celestial liturgists thus is the angels' most particular vocation. All ideas concerning this serving by the divine throne are based on the visions in the Bible and on the experience of the magnificent Byzantine court ceremonial. As the emperor in Constantinople was understood as an image of Christ, the ceremonial at court was seen as a metaphorical representation of celestial celebrations; the angels are – from a human point of view – God's courtly household. Ecclesiastical liturgy as well is an image (εἰκὼν – *icon*) of celestial liturgy, indeed even more than an image: since Christ himself is present and operative in it, his spiritual liturgists are present, too. The incomprehensible service of the divine hosts of heaven is experienceably expressed in the symbolic actions of the state ceremonial and ecclesiastical celebrations:

The angels' powers serve you, the angels' choirs adore you; the multi-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim stand in a circle and fly about; for awe of your inaccessible glory they cover themselves. For you are the undescribable, uninitial and ineffable God.³⁴ – They have Heaven for their dwelling-place, and have one duty, to sing God's praise and carry out His divine will.³⁵

34 Prayer from the consecration of the baptismal water: Euchologion 108.

35 John the Damascene, *fid. orth.* 2, 3; PG 872 C.

2. The Angels in Terrestrial Liturgy

The idea that terrestrial liturgy is an image of the celestial one which is performed with the angels' assistance, was taken over from early Judaism by the early church. It was further developed in Byzantine times and is reflected especially clearly in the *Sanctus* and in a specifically Byzantine way in the *Hymn of the Cherubim*. But also the fact that Byzantine-Slavonic sacred music was composed for one voice only and excluded any accompaniment by musical instruments proves the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius' cultic aestheticism.

The ecclesiastical liturgical ceremony establishes a bridge towards heaven, indeed, mysteriously it is already heaven on earth. The divine, everlasting extends into earthly existence. This is the occasion of encountering God, therefore it is also the occasion to praise Him properly. Particularly celebrating the Holy Eucharist reflects the celestial liturgy. By performing this the congregation encounters the living Christ who, in the midst of the heavenly hosts, the saints and angels enters its centre.³⁶ Surrounded by Cherubim and Seraphim Kyrios Christos approaches the sacrificial altar concealed, but operative and powerful. In Orthodox religious practice the liturgy of the Holy Mass is a sacred drama – not a metaphorical stage play, but a religious event joining together heaven and earth. Through their faith the congregation experiences the entrance of the choirs of angels, who join the faithful in order to proclaim with them God's marvellous doings. Mysteriously they participate in the Holy Mass; on the other hand through the hours the church participates in the angels' everlasting adoration, in their rejoicing and praising in heaven. Symbolic actions interpret this mysterious character of liturgy.

In the following we will present the *Liturgy of Chrysostomos* insofar as it testifies the angels' participation. Preparing the liturgy the priest cuts a few tiny pieces from the sacrificial bread and arranges them around the bit ("the lamb") representing Christ in order to depict the unity of all faithful – the living, the deceased, the saints and the angels. At the same time he commemorates all who belong to the community of saints; thus he expresses their right to participate in the Eucharist. He commemorates the angels with the following words:

*In honour and remembrance of the greatest of all princes of the host, Michael and Gabriel and all heavenly powers of the bodiless.*³⁷

36 For passages from the Fathers cf. e. g. Michl, Engel 162.

37 Hieratikon 60.

During the so-called “minor entrance”, i.e. before the reading of the Gospel, priest, deacon and the person carrying the candle walk from the altar to the area of the congregation bringing the book containing the Gospels with them. Meanwhile the priest softly prays:

*O Lord, our Master and God, Who in heaven established orders and armies of angels and archangels for the service of Your glory, make this our entrance to be an entrance of holy angels, serving together with us, and with us glorifying Your goodness. For to You is due all glory, honour and worship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and forever. Amen.*³⁸

After the solemn entrance with the Gospel-book which is in fact an image of Christ, the choir strikes up the Trishagion; it is that ancient Christian litany which up to the present Roman liturgy still has sung in Greek in the Improperia on Good Friday during the adoration of the cross:³⁹ “Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal, have mercy on us!” The priest introduces his with the following prayer:

*Holy you are, God, whom the quadric-shaped beings glorify in an incessant voice. Holy you are, God, you, who are adored and glorified by the hosts of angels and archangels invisibly and with trembling. Holy you are, God, you who look on the multi-eyed Cherubim below you and lend your ears to the never silent voice before your ineffable throne. Holy you are, God, you, who are enthroned upon the six-winged Seraphim and receive how they are rustling with their wings and singing the Trishagion: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth! Holy you are, our God, whom the Dominations, Principalities and Powers adore and worship. Lover of men, accept also the Trishagion sung by us sinners; it is offered to you by us and by all your people; and send down upon us your abounding mercy and pity.*⁴⁰

With the “major entrance” the “liturgy of the faithful” begins; in a procession priest and deacon carry the offerings of bread and wine to the altar where they shall become Christ’s body and blood. So they are now already an imaginal manifestation of him, point to his imminent epiphany; therefore also the Cherubim – visibly represented by priest, deacon and congregation – and the entire household of the heavenly court are assembled to serve the king. Christ is transported into the circle of the faithful by the hosts of angels. As Roman soldiers placed the newly-elected emperor on a shield and carried him through their files, thus proclaiming his claim to power, so the King of Kings is transported on the *diskos*, the paten, as on a shield, by the invisible legions of angels to the altar, his throne, so that he represents his sacrifice as lord of heaven and earth. During this magnificent procession when

38 Hieratikon 70.

39 ἅγιος ὁ θεός, ἅγιος ἰσχυρός, ἅγιος ἀθάνατος ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.

40 Heitz, Gottesdienst 225.

the congregation imitates the angels, the singers begin to sing the affecting *Cherubikon*, the hymn of the Cherubim:

*We who mystically represent the Cherubim sing the thrice holy hymn to the life giving Trinity. Let us set aside all the cares of life that we may receive the King of all invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.*⁴¹

The angels' presence in the Eucharistic liturgy⁴² has double sense: They are the cosmos and everlasting king's guards of honour delivering the faithfuls' prayer to Him, and they encourage the congregation to glorify the universal ruler in a respectful way:

*Consider with whom you are together and with whom you are about to invoke God with the Cherubim. Imagine which choirs you are going to join and it will help you to calmness when you bear in mind that you, though flesh and blood, were deemed worthy to celebrate the mutual lord of all beings together with the bodiless powers. No one ought to chime in these sacred and mysterious songs carelessly. No one ought to adhere to earthly thoughts, but detached from all earthly things and entirely transferred into heaven as if he himself stood next to the throne of glory and hovered with the Seraphim, he shall sing the most holy praise to the God of glory and sublimity.*⁴³

The faithful who may enjoy the community with Christ through receiving the sacraments, is even superior to the angels; he belongs to that body before whose head all angels bow:

*Let us reverence our Head, let us reflect of what a Head we are the body,—a Head, to whom all things are put in subjection. According to this representation we ought to be better, yea, than the very angels, and greater than the Archangels, in that we have been honoured above them all. God "took not hold of Angels," as he says in writing to the Hebrews, "but He took hold of the seed of Abraham" (Heb 2: 16). He took hold of neither principality nor power, nor dominion, nor any other authority, but He took up our nature, and made it to sit on His right hand.*⁴⁴

In the festival liturgies angels viz. archangels appear as proclaimers of God's glory on the occasion of Christ's birth, the Annunciation, Christ's resurrection and ascension. The angels function as "assistants" on Epiphany, at the same time Christ's baptism. In all these positions they are often represented in an acclaiming gesture. As God's agents they take the Apostles to the deceasing mother of Christ and guide her corporeally into heaven. On November 8 the archangel Michael is celebrated in a festivity of his own, whereas Gabriel's day is March 26. Raphael is mentioned on September 8 and November 8. In Kolossai (later Chonae),⁴⁵ one of the most ancient cultic places in Asia Minor for

41 Euchologion 49.

42 For passages from the Fathers cf. e. g. Michl, Engel 161–163.

43 Johannes Chrysostomos, *De incomprehensibili Dei natura hom.*, 4, 5.

44 Johannes Chrysostomos, *hom. 3 in Eph* 1, 15–23.

45 Cf. Kol 2:18.

the worship of angelic powers,⁴⁶ even earlier than the 7th century a church was built in honour of the archangel Michael. According to a legend Michael miraculously defeated the resistance that had risen against the building of the church. Whereas a petitionary prayer canon addressed to the guardian angel⁴⁷ was introduced in the 11th century, the choosing of patron angels reached its climax in the 11th and 12th centuries.

3. Types of Presentation

Artists in the early church first presented angels as wingless and beardless young men; winged angels became common later; they were modelled on the antique *nike* and *genius*. In Byzantine art the stiff beauty of the angel as a stereotype became predominant and was preserved. Because of its significance in liturgy and iconography the presentation of the Cherubim (cf. Ezek 1:4-25; Rev 4:6-11) viz. the tetramorph and the Seraphim (Isa 6) in the cupola is important. The clothing of the angels, especially the archangels Michael and Gabriel, was determined according to their respective function: as “arch-strategist” in armour, as Christ’s ambassador with the staff, taken as high-ranked (corresponding to the imperial) celestial “official” with the kosmos, the *sphaira*, in the left and the (originally senatorial) purple border (*clavi*) his garment, as liturgical assistant in the garment of the deacon. Michael is often presented as a celestial door-keeper next to the entrance of the church, apart from festive images single angels and orders of angels appear in illustrations of the Last Judgement, including the fall of angels (Gen 6:1-4; 2Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 12:9). – The composition of the archangels’ synaxis according to the hymns of November 8 shows Michael and Gabriel with staffs in their hands and holding a medallion (the *clipeus*) with the Immanuel in front of them. It originated in the 9th century probably expressing the defeat of the iconoclasts. Corresponding presentations among the pictures of Christ⁴⁸ are to be understood as repulsion of the Bogomiles’ ideas⁴⁹ of a Christ-angel, whereas the Christ-

46 Cf. Kötting, Peregrinatio 166–171.

47 Greek ἄγγελος ὁ φύλαξ.

48 Cf. the type of Christ-icons “angels of the Great Assembly”; for the theology cf. Michaelis, Engelchristologie.

49 Neo-Manichaean Bulgarian heresy (10th century) had a consequently gnostic-dualistic world-view; they rejected the incarnation, crucifixion and ascension of Christ and consequently Mary as God’s mother; they also rejected the worship of angels, saints, icons and relics in the Orthodox Church and they condemned the church

angel in the composition of God's wisdom reflects complicated theological associations.⁵⁰

In this context we refer once again to the myth of Michael defeating Lucifer; in painting this motif is known since the 6th century and it was used in the political ideology of the Christian empire. Already in the age of Emperor Constantine († 337) Michael was venerated as ἀρχιστρατηγός ("arch-general"). Since the 9th century these ideas would be directed especially against the Bogomiles who identifies themselves with the fallen angels of myth and who worshipped Christ as the "bodiless" supreme angel who did not become human because of this. The Church opposed the heretics' identification of Christ with Michael as an "angel of the Great Assembly" by developing a type that presents Christ as an "angel of the Great Assembly" as well, though with stigmata in his hands and feet, a concept which was unbearable for the Bogomiles. Thus the Church had to defend its doctrine concerning angels both against an exaggerating objectivization and against an exaggerating spiritualization.

4. The Beauty of Angels

The angels are extremely close to God, they participate in his abounding life and they can look at him; surpassing the creatures' state of being God's image, they are like Him and they are distributing his gifts of grace – in spite of this Orthodox doctrine stresses their creaturely nature time and again. The latter puts them into an immeasurable remoteness from God's over-mighty being and His self-sufficient bliss. They do their service before God with awe and trembling, and although they are allowed to see God, they do not dare look at Him, but cover themselves with their wings respectfully.

*To look at the beauty of your inaccessible glory, tri-solar oneness, the Seraphim do not endure. With wings they cover themselves and in thrice-sacred hymns they praise you endlessly.*⁵¹

The angels are radiating with unimaginable beauty – a symbol of their participation in divine life. As most impressive sign of this supernatural beauty the angels (when they are allowed to be seen by men) are

buildings as dwelling-places of the Devil, they did not accept any divine service and ecclesiastical rites.

50 Cf. the Bulgarian and Serbian icons of the type "wisdom of God" with the presentation of Christ as male (!) Sophia: cf. Onasch, *Lexikon* 382f.; for the appearance of angels in icon of the trinity, cf. 89f.

51 4th Canon of the Trinity, 1st Ode, 3rd Troparion; Oktoichos 190.

surrounded by a splendour of brightness emitted from them and covering them; it is not sufficient to describe it in terms of the glittering snow and the shining sun. For man such an abundance of light is unendurable so that fear and tremor seize him when an angel appears:

*To the first of the angels you give your commands immediately and you make him shine with the inaccessible glamour of your beauty. Through your beams, trinity, only and first cause, illuminate those who sing to you in true faith.*⁵²

With the gift of his holiness God has crowned the beauty the angels own because of their supernatural heavenly spiritual nature. Adding to this merciful elevation he gave immortality to them:

*It [sc. the angel] is immortal, not by nature but by grace. For all that has had beginning comes also to its natural end. But God alone is eternal, or rather, He is above the Eternal: for He, the Creator of times, is not under the dominion of time, but above time. They are secondary intelligent lights derived from that first light which is without beginning, for they have the power of illumination; they have no need of tongue or hearing, but without uttering words they communicate to each other their own thoughts and counsels.*⁵³

More than anywhere else iconographs have to use symbols in order to represent the angels' merciful elevation in an image. Human reason and the artist's fantasy fail considering the celestial powers' holiness and beauty there remain only attempts at alluding to the incomprehensible. So the Byzantine image of angels is a result of combining Greek and Oriental ideals of beauty. Angels are always painted as juvenile male figures characterized by stately shape, curling hair and beaming faces. They are presented in an ideal spiritual beauty so that God's perfect abundance of life is expressed by their always happy youth and flourishing life.

5. Appointed to Serve the Faithful: Michael and Gabriel

Michael and Gabriel in particular exceed among those angels who take care of the faithfuls' welfare; Holy Scripture only reveals these two angelic names and that of Raphael (in *Tobit*).⁵⁴

Michael (Hebrew = who [is] like god?) is the protective spirit of the Jewish people and one of the heavenly princes (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1). According to Jewish tradition God has divided the nations of the world

52 1st Canon of the Trinity, 5th Ode, 1st Troparion; Oktoichos 5.

53 John the Damascene, *fid. orth.* 2, 3.

54 For the further development of the three into a group of four (mostly including Uriel) and its expansion to a group of seven (with four further names of angels chosen arbitrarily) and even further possible sequences cf. Michl, Engel 183–186.

into 72 regions and appointed angels as guardian of each. Michael is the greatest among these. In extra-canonical Jewish writings he is regarded as God's confidant taking the seat of honour next to Him and keeping the keys of heaven. He is the angel of justice and judgement, but also of mercy and grace, supreme celestial liturgist and commander of the heavenly hosts.

The people of the new covenant adopt these views for the most part. The angel Michael becomes the archangel (Jude 9); he is the leader of angels who fight against Satan and the guardian of the Church of Jesus (cf. Rev 12:7f.). As Joshua is about to conquer Jericho "he saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand" who introduces himself as the "commander of the army of the LORD" (Josh 5:13f.). Corresponding to Jewish interpretation the Orthodox Church also regards this figure as the angel Michael; they like to call him ἀρχιστρατηγός ("commander-in-chief") and often represent him wearing an armour.

Many legends are told about this angel. The Jewish saw Michael as their saviour from many a danger, who especially intervenes at the end of times and makes it a happy ending; in Christian opinion he was also regarded as an assistant in any need: He takes care to guide the deceased safely before God's tribunal. He saves the souls from the snares arranged by the numerous spirits who were supposed to be hovering in the air. He leads them safe and sound into Abraham's bosom, an image of Paradise and of the dwelling-place of the souls until their resurrection. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus Christ mentions angels who carry the poor into the Patriarch's bosom (Luke 16:22). The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus may conclude from this that Jesus entrusts Michael with the souls of the redeemed when he descended to Hades. Finally, Michael is regarded as the archangel with whose "call and with the sound of God's trumpet" (1Thess 4:16) Christ will descend from heaven as judge. At this moment Michael's intercessory prayer is particularly necessary.

The dignity assigned to Michael by the Holy Scripture and by popular belief is more important than that of any other angel. Therefore, the title of "archangel" does not mean that he belongs to the lowest group of celestial choirs, but that he takes a privileged position among all celestial powers.

Michael, sublime leader of angels teacher of the erring, supreme commander of the Lord's host, appear among us in this very hour and take the prayers of all the faithful before to sole creator and lord. Michael, sublime leader of angels, rescue the people who assemble today in your temple and proclaim God's magnificent doings. Michael, leader of angels, you are standing by the governor's throne, appear among us and guide onto the paths of life those whose constant protector you are.

*Michael, supreme commander of the Lord's host, those who faithfully assemble in your holy temple to praise God, guide and protect them from any harm through your intercession. You leader of the bodiless, head of the powers, together with them pray for us, that our trespasses will be forgiven, that our lives will improve and that we will enjoy the eternal blessings. Illumination, beg for us, supreme commander of hosts, as you steadfastly accompany the great light, and give peace to our existence which is threatened by the serpent everywhere and is always troubled by the dangers of life, you adorable!*⁵⁵

Gabriel (Hebrew = strength/ hero of god) is mentioned in the Old Testament only in Dan, he transmits divine revelations to the prophet (Dan 8:16; 9:21). In the New Testament he introduces himself as "Gabriel who stands in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19). He announces the birth of John and the incarnation of Jesus. Only post-Biblical writings call him an "archangel". In the Orthodox Church Michael and Gabriel are usually mentioned together. All characteristics and activities of Michael which are dedicated to the welfare of God's people are also attributed to Gabriel; to him in particular the angelic bookkeeping concerning human deeds is assigned. As for his dignity he is closely related to Michael:

*Gabriel, the greatest spirit, most perfectly created in the image of God, the brightness of celestial light who beholds the trinitary sun and sees together with the hosts of heaven, announced to the Virgin the awe-inspiring mystery when he visited her; he is praying for our souls.⁵⁶ – In heaven you look at God's glory and offer His grace from the heights on earth; leader of angels, wise Gabriel, servant of God's glory and divine champion of the world, rescue, protect those who are invoking you: Be a helper yourself, and no one is against us!*⁵⁷

Manifold are the presentations showing the angels functioning as guardian angels⁵⁸ and divine messengers. Holy Scripture offers various suggestions to such illustrations. This subject can only be presented in an example here; we have chosen the *deesis*.

The *deesis* ("intercession") is the subject of many paintings on walls and tablets. Kyrios Christos is sitting on the throne of divine glory. Blessing, teaching and judging he holds out his right hand; in his left he is holding the book of life. All men have to answer him for their conduct. When he appears surrounded by the hosts of heaven, men have to account for their activities before him. Good and important intercessors

55 Canon of Joseph on the paralyzed, the 5th Troparia of the 4th – 9th Ode, in the morning of the 3rd Sunday after Easter; Pentekostarion 77–81.

56 Sticheron in memory of Gabriel, March 26; Menaion, März 166.

57 Kontakion in memory of all appearances of the archangel Gabriel, July 13; Horologion 414f..

58 In Syria we often find the sign ΧΜΤ on tombs and door-frames, which probably means „Christ – Michael – Gabriel“ and will have an apotropaic function in any case (similar to the widespread C+M+B in the Alps); cf. Michl, Engel 182.

are urgently needed then – Mary and John the Baptist, his mother and his precursor. Humbly they hold up their hands and beg for grace for mankind. The arrangement of the persons just mentioned is important: Christ's mother Mary is placed on Christ's right,⁵⁹ the Baptist on the left. Behind the Baptist Gabriel is standing, thus looking at Mary (as in the annunciation); behind Mary Michael is positioned, who is facing the Baptist.⁶⁰ The celestial powers join them. The angels follow their queen in her intercessory praying. Incessantly they intercede for their brothers on earth.

The church building is an antechamber of heaven. Michael and Gabriel are its guards. In many churches we find their portraits next to the portal which leads from the entrance hall to the nave: Michael as general, Gabriel carrying the scroll. This presentation is to remind us that Gabriel writes down all thoughts and deeds of men to preserve them for doomsday so that only the just will gain access to God's glory. As God's creature he wears a blue tunic. The gold of heaven and the purple of divine majesty decorate his gown and his wings. The beautiful head reflects eternal youth and holiness; it is directed towards the visitors of the church. God himself is looking into human hearts through these eyes.

6. Christian Life – Participating in the Angels' Life

There is no church building in the culture of the Eastern Churches where there are no representations of angels.⁶¹ The church building is the point of intersection of the celestial and the terrestrial world; here the visible and the invisible creation are united by Christ, who has established his throne in it.

The new reality given to men through the sacraments is a gift and a demand at the same time. When the faithful pray: "Your will be done as in heaven so on earth!" (Matt 6:10) they know that the celestial powers meet with God's purpose perfectly. The Christian imitates the angels' example when he detaches himself from a thinking of this world. When he emulates the angels in surrendering to divine purpose he is leading an angel-like life. For this they are his example and stimulus. They venture anything in order to guide and to support his endeav-

59 As seen from within the icon, that is "left" from the observer's point of view.

60 NB: Who is familiar with the method of the so-called "Familienaufstellung" in the field of psychotherapy may think it over what it means, which archangel is standing behind (!) which person.

61 Cf. Heiser, Engel 143ff.

ours. With the festive seasons the church offers to the faithful many opportunities to imitate the Lord; it is especially the purpose of Lent to bring about this. So the angels' support is asked just for these very 40 days of penance:

*At any time fasting is good for those who choose to do so and keep it. A fasting person is not challenged by the demons' wantonness, on the contrary, the guardians of our life, the angels, prefer to stay with us when we are purified by fasting.*⁶²

Every Christian is called to imitate the Lord. But there are some whom God gives the order and grace they need for it in a singular way: these are the monks and nuns. God calls them when they are admitted to the choir of monks "to be deemed worthy of the angels' mode".⁶³ They leave the profane way of life which does not mean that they depart from the world or do not have any commission to execute in it.

*A solemn promise is obtained from the disciples who are admitted to be instructed in religion, and they are warned not to be governed by the transient world, but by the always solid nature of the angels to whom they ought to look up. Their example will strengthen the stability and steadfastness of their virtue in public. As it is indeed promised to us that life after our resurrection will be like the status of the angels (cf. Matt 22:30) ...; it follows that already life in this world has to be assimilated to the future life we are hoping for. This must be done in such a way that yet, while we are living according to the flesh and are dwelling on the soil of this world, we do not live according to the flesh and are not conformed to this world (cf. Rom 8:12; 12:2, but already accommodate ourselves to that life which we hope for in the hereafter. Therefore, the bride (= the church) addresses the souls of her disciples and earnestly reminds them to be guided by heaven in their life on this soil, to look for the celestial powers and to imitate the angels' purity through calmness of mind.*⁶⁴

Such thoughts are not merely wishful thinking, but belong to the gist of Christian belief, they are testimony of the Holy Spirit's effectiveness as St. Paul has it: "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1Kor 15:10). To some people, who strive to obey God's will with all their might, angels sometimes appear and strengthen them in their efforts. Their appearances will supply them with comfort and strength. These experiences of grace are effected by God himself:

But it comes so quietly and gently that immediately joy, gladness and courage arise in the soul. For the Lord who is our joy is with them, and the power of God the Father. And the thoughts of the soul remain unruffled and undisturbed, so that it, enlightened as it were with rays, beholds by itself those who appear. For the love of what is divine and of the things to come possesses it, and willingly it would be wholly joined with them if it could depart along with them. But if, being men,

62 Idiomelon on Monday morning before the 7th Sunday before Easter; Triodion 37.

63 Rite of investiture for the small Schima; Euchologion 148.

64 Gregory of Nyssa, *In cant.* 4 [PG 44, 856C–857A].

*some fear the vision of the good, those who appear immediately take fear away; as Gabriel (Luke 1:13) did in the case of Zechariah, and as the angel (Mark 16:6) did who appeared to the women at the holy sepulchre, and as He did who said to the shepherds in the Gospel, "Fear not" (Luke 2:10). For their fear arose not from timidity, but from the recognition of the presence of superior beings. Such then is the nature of the visions of the holy ones.*⁶⁵

7. The Angels Guiding the Soul of the Deceased

The belief that angels take charge of the soul when a man dies and guide it to the world beyond expresses the conviction that God alone is the lord of life and death. It is their task to separate the soul from the body and accompany it to its destination; they protect the souls of the righteous against the demons and prepare their honourable welcome at their destination. For the souls that must stay at a distance from God until doomsday because they have led a vicious life on earth, there merely remains one single comfort and hope, namely the knowledge that they are not excluded from the intercessory prayers of the community of angels:

*Please, my beloved angels, recall my intercourse with you and remember me! Have mercy upon me, you holiest angels of the almighty God, and release me of the wages of all evil; since I cannot exhibit any good work to counterbalance my trespasses. When you, my holiest angels, will come in order to stand before Christ's tribunal, bend your knees and cry out to him with laments: have mercy, creator of everything, on the work of your fingers and do not reject it, gracious lord! On your knees entreat the mistress and purest mother of our God and implore that she bend her knees with you and make him favour your prayer; for she as mother and wet-nurse will be heard.*⁶⁶

Dying calmly and peacefully is regarded as a reflection of the joy of the angels who are present at the deathbed; they have hastened to guide the soul into Paradise. If man has tried to imitate the angels' life in his lifetime, this mystic ascending is now continued by further ascending towards God. The angels are companions and guides. As even a righteous person is not sinless when facing God's holiness, demons and Satan's angels and assistants lurk at his way in order to lay claim to his soul. They demand tribute and duty, and they try to bar the passage to Paradise. The image of the custom house is employed to explain this. In spite of their threats and the horror they evoke, they are powerless with regard to the faithful because Christ has rescued the latter from the

⁶⁵ Athanasius, *v. Ant.* 35.

⁶⁶ Canon of prayer for a dying person, 7th Ode, 1st – 4th Troparia; Euchologion 299.

demons' reign when he was exalted on the cross. The angels oppose the demons and reject any slander concerning sin that has already been forgiven. They accompany the souls of the righteous protecting them against the terrifying faces. If the demons cannot prove their accusations, they have to let the soul pass on. But if the person's trespasses are too bad and not counterbalanced by any good deed, the demons snatch the soul away from the angels' hands. A soul like this will be taken to Hades to excruciating torment. This is not the final judgement, though, as this is reserved to Christ. Since it is merely a preliminary Judgement which can be annulled by Christ's verdict the guardian angel is asked to persist in praying for the deceased. This is the last act of kindness the angels can perform for men:

*Now all my lifetime has evaporated like smoke; only the angels sent by God are still there; they lay claim to my poor soul mercilessly. Behold, a troop of evil spirits takes me by surprise; they present a catalogue of my sin, they shout furiously and lay claim to my poor soul impudently.*⁶⁷

8. Angels and Saints

Like the early church Orthodoxy first talks about martyrs when it praises the saints of heaven in songs.⁶⁸ Already since the earliest times the church especially revered her martyrs. Like St. Paul they have "fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith", now there is reserved for them "the crown of righteousness", which "the Lord, the righteous judge will give" them (2Tim 4:7f.). The metaphor of the contest in a stadium perfectly suits the martyrs who sacrificed their lives in the arenas of the Roman Empire for the sake of their faith.⁶⁹ The crown as a prize is a metaphor of eternal life that is given to the martyrs.

67 Canon of prayer for a dying person, 1st Ode, 2nd and 3rd Troparion; Euchologion 297.

68 After Constantine had made peace also those are worshipped as saints whose life resembled the martyrs' in that they showed great love for Christ.

69 Regarding martyrs in Rev: the only martyr to be mentioned by name is Antipas (Rev 2:13); but numerous anonymous victims of Roman tyranny stand beside him (cf. Rev 6:9; 12:17; 17:6; 20:4), so that the author of Rev may finally say, that in Rome is found "the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth" (18:24) here the perspective is extended to other victims of Rome murderous rule besides Christian martyrs. Thus he makes clear that the executions were not the fate of a few individuals, but rather that anyone leading a Christian life consequently has to take such a lot into account because of the nature of the Roman Empire. According to the sources available, by the end of Domitian's reign Christians were not systematically spied out and persecuted; but among his addressees persecution had been experienced as a distressing situation; cf. Ernst, Offenbarung des Johannes, in: Beilner / Ernst, Wort Gottes 618f.

Christ himself comes to meet the victorious with his hosts and takes them to the Father into glory.

The angels' celestial world is interested in this contest on earth. As soon as the trumpet in the stadium announces the end of the contest and the glorious victors come home from this world, the angels come to meet and to welcome them. The glorious reception the angels prepare for the martyrs proves their love for those who have sacrificed their lives for Christ's sake; they may now enter the files of the celestial choirs and participate in their bliss. Reception and honours in heaven can only be described in human terms. Though the angels are superior to the worldly course of events, nevertheless, they (together with the church) cheerfully sympathize with the service in memory of the martyrs:

Now, all you faithful, let us honour the memory of the saints who have been crowned with victory. For they have become a spectacle to angels and men, they have received the crown of victory from Christ and intercede for our souls.⁷⁰

The Fathers regard martyrdom as a fight of cosmic dimensions: angels and demons participate in it. The angels who protect and support man during his lifetime and who take care that the faithful entrusted to them will be rescued, give courage and perseverance to the martyrs by their presence. They are ready to carry their souls into God's glory after their victory.

9. Worshipping Angels

The 7th Oecumenical Council of Nicaea (787)⁷¹ condemned iconoclasts and defended the worship of saints and angels in icons and prayers. The Fathers of the Council praise the philanthropic angels who bring men's prayers before God, who intercede for them and pass God's favours on to men. They deduce the reason for worshipping angels and saints from the doctrine of intercession. Worshipping, the προσκύνησις,

70 Troparion of the martyrs on Monday morning before the 7th Sunday before Easter; Triodion 37.

71 The Empress Irene summoned the Council in 787 in Nicaea (today İzmit/Turkey). Concerning the controversy regarding icons, it allowed to venerate, but not to adore them. Substantially, it followed the arguments of Johannes of Damascus an. The iconoclastic Council of Hiëreia in 754 was declared invalid. The Council of Nicaea is considered as the 7th Oecumenical Council with the Catholic and the Orthodox Church; Protestants do not agree in their estimation of its decrees. Orthodox Churches celebrate the 1st Sunday of Lent in memory of this Council ("Sunday of the Orthodoxy" or "Sunday of Holy Icons"). – Cf. Uphus, *Der Horos des Zweiten Konzils von Nizäa 787*.

that the most extreme kind of reverence which was allowed to men in antique homages, is due to the angels. Worshipping their images refers to the angels themselves, i.e. to the original. This worship is to be distinguished from the adoration (λατρεία) which is reserved for God only.

The angels are God's most trusty friends; they are standing by his throne, and he has decorated them with love, holiness, and might. Whoever prays for their help, or asks for their intercessory prayer, worships them because he acknowledges their prerogatives. Thus in the beginning of every week the faithful commend themselves to their protection: Monday is the day of remembering them. In the course of the ecclesiastical year festivals of angels are celebrated repeatedly.⁷² The faithful population perceptibly expressed its veneration by choosing angels as patrons of their churches. Churches named after angels are consecrated to God; they bear the angels' names as God gives blessing because of their intercessory prayer. As the historian Prokopios tells us, already the Emperor Justinianus (527-565) erected six churches of St. Michael, and eastern architecture testifies that other Christian rulers did not fall short of him.

The worship of angels is embedded in the entire attitude and practice of faith in the Orthodox Church which regards God alone as the origin of everything that is good; he operates through his creatures. Holy Scripture offers manifold testimony of the angels' high esteem. Jesus himself commands to respect the little ones by referring to the angels who "continually see the face of my father in heaven" (Matt 18:10). The Fathers agree: God alone, the trinitary and the triune, deserves adoration; they condemn any idolatrous cult of angels, but they stand up for venerating the angels and the saints: *The angels teach us to honour and adore not them, but only God who is above all... You see how they reject veneration; but to adore the lord of the universe – this they do not prevent. They teach us that it is not appropriate in liturgical celebration to offer sacrifice to them who are ruled by God, but rather to the Lord.*⁷³

72 See above.

73 Cyrill of Alexandria, 4. ep. 1 [PG 76, 689 A. C. D.].

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